

Knox Knox by Catherine Harper

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You're a fucking cunt like the cunt you're fucking...

Taboo's face was a smeared mess, tears, spit, mascara, her mouth open in frozen protest. Wide eyes aghast, hands outspread. Inflected by viciousness and fear, her words suddenly held a neediness Knox hadn't heard before. Knox was the one who needed, not her, and it was in that very moment – with cunt ringing off the sooty brick walls at the darker end of Charlotte Street – it was just all too much.

What would you know about cunts? Knox whispered...

Knox turned and walked, snipping a cord and tying it off. His fingers for a second fizzed and crackled to scrub her face to mince, snap her spine, but his mind muscles morphed inwards to chill the heat and bring him cool control. Not Taboo, not her. She had been his comfort and solace, but Hell could take her before he'd be that – his lip curled – weak, again. Some other softness was waiting for him, round some other corner...

Into Scala Street, breathing easier, he slid his hands into trouser pockets, slowed his pace. Selecting the flâneur's gait he strolled with his heels swishing and clicking importantly on the wet pavement. And as he strolled, he meted out a slower more reflective pace, and found himself again. She was a fucking cunt. The fucking cunt she was fucking was a fucking cunt. He should have known better than to be anywhere near two fucking cunts. Or two cunts fucking...

Round a couple more corners, Knox stopped. He had made his way, without consciously doing so, to a small gloomy square behind Goodge Street, one of many sopping fetid little squares London boasted as rural spaces for the urban masses to urinate, defecate, shoot up and shag in. He didn't know its name, but he had been here before.

As the rain came on and the light lowered, he stooped through its rusty broken railings into the bottle greenness, and sensed for presence. An unwholesome smell, vile vegetation, intensified with the wetness, and that other root smell like rotting meat reeked up from the undergrowth. Pattering drops quickened to a raucous roar as he plunged under foliage and into ink-dark piss-rich intensity. Knox felt a hand flutter across his thigh and he knew he'd be okay. His apricot lashes flickered as he half-sensed, half-smelled the man in the shadows. His tongue tasted bitter as he turned to face his next fuck, his balls tightening with pleasurable anxiety, his sphincter softening with the emollient of sex and survival.

There was always that, the illicit hungers even in this liberal legal licence. There was always lust and shame. Shame you could eat and lust you could live like a lord – or a libertine – off. Knox's cock froze hard as the man knelt wordlessly like a penitent in the leaves, opened his wet mouth, closed his eyes, and received the Host.

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Taboo leaned heavily against the sooty wall in Charlotte Street. A long time passed. She was deafened by Knox's words, the piercing fury of them, flayed by his ferocity and fear. Slowly she came around, and realised she was cold. She needed to go home, and start living her life.

She would never see Knox again, yet he would always be with her, remembered as her tormentor and the one who had shown her another kind of life. She knew he'd be okay, he was always okay, there was always somebody who would take care of Knox, feel special for

a bit, feel they could save him from the devils inside him. There was always some poor sod to get crippled.

Walking up to the junction, she crossed into Gresse Street, walked slowly to the black door at No.14. She looked up to the third floor window's light glowing behind its orange curtain, and turned her key. The shabby stairs went ahead upwards into the dusty darkness, with other flat doors opening off to the left. Up there beyond the dark was home, and a warm brown woman called Bella who was hers and who loved her for exactly what she was.

Neither of us, she thought wearily, are cunts.

* * *

Londonderry, 1959: incessant rain for centuries, the permanent stink of bigots and hypocrites rubbing

up and down against each other, festering in the summer, fetid in winter.

The Troubles, so-called, were still a decade away, and sectarianism was a right under God. Below the radar of the Catholic-Protestant great divide, the collective social obsession on all sides with who you were and where you came from, the moralist jibes flung across the gap – 'you're the Pope's hoor', 'youse are fenian shites', 'yer a fat Orange fucker', 'yer ma rode King Billy's horse' – were wider cracks in the moral codes of the time. An ordinary woman, a mother of three, nothing special, not even good-looking, enacted the sexual slippage of fucking her husband's brother. Just once.

Just once, but it was in the room where the corpse of both men's mother, a spiteful stick if truth were told, lay on a white embroidered linen tablecloth on their high marital bed, even then dominating their union as she'd done since day one. Lying in state, being visited one by one by dour mouse-coloured Presbyterians in dark fusty suits with bad musty breaths, that dead mother-in-law was the silent witness to the greatest, most urgent, most unlikely, and most inexplicable fuck in all her life.

The brother, over briefly from doing God knew what in England to see his mother into the earth, was a breath of fresh air to this woman. Tall and wiry where her husband was stocky, raven-haired where her husband was pale, attractive where her husband was not, the Divine Fuck deserved Divine Retribution, and was worth it in the couple of minutes it took them. The Sin had no preamble, and the Sin had no afterword. It overtook them with cataclysmic force, they fucked with Leviathan power, they recognised a monstrous Sin (for different reasons: she because it broke her marital and Christian vows and she'd momentarily wanted that; he because it utterly fucked his dead mother and he'd for a lifetime wanted that). She straightened herself down, wiped herself up, and went down to make more of the endless hateful tea to pour into the scrawny gullets of the Elders of First Waterside Presbyterian Kirk.

Nothing was said. The burial came and went next day in incessant glutinous rain. She burned in an inner Hell. Her husband and the Divine Fuck looked blinded as grieving sons would and should. Cain, for he might as well have been, went off post-burial as planned, and only her hot, chafed innards told her it was real.

Now this is not a stereotypical story of wanton Catholics, falling decadently but inevitably from grace, with malnourished name-less weans sharing sheet-less beds with

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bachelor uncles, pigs in kitchens, and stinking paedo-Priests overlooking the shambles. No. This is a tale of Ulster Presbyterians, a hard-pressed and respectable section of humanity, for whom God is a real, moral and rigorous master and Hell is a hair's breadth away. The moral code of such people is firm, fundamentalist and righteous, their mindset unwavering, the authority of elders uncompromising, and the sanctity of the Sabbath Day unshakeable. This is a true story that starts in the heart of a tiny community of these Presbyterians, a sect within a sect, uber-Protestants within Protestantism, ultra-Puritans within Puritanism, perched as they are on the East Bank of the Foyle, looking across the waters to the Cityside of Derry, where the Catholics live and where danger lies, and yet looking around themselves at other God-fearing neighbours who still don't fear enough...

* * *

A butcher's shop on the Waterside, a modest family home above it: the universal model of ineffectual and small-minded industriousness, ticking by. A woman, not showing but knowing that she carries a black-headed bastard. An epic fearful scene in her head: the Babylonian Whore.

A butcher's shop on the Waterside, closed with the blinds drawn down. A Sabbath, to be kept holy, but she had waited until midnight, and gone in. *Ardens sed vivens* – burning but living – that's what the Reverend Orr said at the morning and the afternoon meetings, and that's when they prayed to their all-seeing just God, His Day honoured by meditation and simple sustenance. But she was in trouble, this white under-stone maggotty woman, with her insincere simplicity and her knowing gullibility and her weak weasel words. Her husband slept like a slumbering bull above the shop, his purple nose rhythmically drawing in the rankness of the airless room and expelling his own obnoxious lung odours into the foul mix. Like a big-boned bull he lay on his back, his chin to his God, his mind oblivious to domestic evils and the night-ramble of his wakeful sinner of a wife. And as he slept, she stood in that husband's shop, in the dampness of the small hours, with blinds down, burning with shame, hatred, and a different feverish something from inside.

A butcher's wife on the Waterside, compelled by a work ethic without purpose she laboured. Shifting great heavy lumps of flesh and bone, pushing and straining, hacking and wrenching where bits of gristle got tough, or where sinews stretched before the blade of her slumbering man's knife. The knife was heavy and not as sharp as it should be. Dragging. A dull ache in her lower back. A damp weariness washing over her. Red gore stretched up her white blue-veined arms, up and over her elbows. The smell was that cold, familiar smell of fresh cool meat, older hard fat, and sawdust.

It was cold in the shop, February's fearful chill, but her bovine body burned, exuding an iced sweat, under her arms, between and under her heavy throbbing breasts, down her channelled spine. A greasy sweat, congealed even as it smeared out of each pore. Her smell was boiled lambish, the scent of baby sheep slow-simmered in their own fright, with little seasoning and enough boggy potatoes to pack it out. Greasy, rancid, cloying.

She cried and she whisper-ranted in futile fury against the Sin: she was a stupid cow, a feckless cow, in calf to her own bull's bullish brother. And, God-fearing woman that she was, she would endeavour to enact an even greater Sin to cover the first. She would lose this half-formed creature and never think again, until she would be forced to account for her sinful life before her God. Then, and she knew it, she would be found wanting and she would be condemned to Hell's rot forever. On this night, however, if she could have made her own womb a sac of Satan's poisonous bile she would. Such was this weak and craven woman of the Waterside.

Knox, the unborn issue of the Sin, gripped the flesh-cushions of engorged tissue that cosseted him. Held as he was in the cosy musculature of uterine comfort, Knox was alert, intelligent, active, tuned to the hatred of his mother. Fingers, toes, jaw, elbows, knees, spine, skull, variously pressed, tensed and held on, manoeuvring himself this way and that, his undeveloped nostrils scenting, twitching, revolting against the lamby stench of this maternal host. Mammy, mother, ma – there was no love lost here. Knox had pitted himself against a knitting needle inserted into his red cavern, a steely needle that had furiously spiked and goaded him, tried to puncture him, impale him, put him out like an embryonic eye.

Fuck you! Knox whispered...

Would-be mammy, would-be murderess. Fuck your agony and fuck the filthy bitch whose help you sought, not amongst your own kind, the upright puritans of Waterside. Fuck the fenian cunt you'd found in Shantallow, an evil whorish witch who pulled foetal forms from sworn Catholic virgins from across the North-West counties. Virgins, who'd been overcome by the Gaelic croons and whisky fumes of fathers, brothers, and occasionally lovers, and found themselves 'in de family way'.

A wink, a nod, an act, a not-even-infant death, a never-was, a nothing said again. In Derry, in 1959, I promise such a thing happened, such a woman lived, and such was never spoken of again...

Restless, fitful, his acrobatics learned from the pressing and pummelling she nightly gave to her own belly, and the stabbing, Knox was nevertheless consumed by love for his own life. Bite, suck dry, devour, propelled by hatred for his host and love for himself, Knox in his primordial state knew his mission, his only hell-bent goal, was life. The knitting needle that had entered his burning cell probed and pricked, but he twisted and turned, writhed and bent, so that no part of the body he already loved with all his forming heart was harmed. Her retching and sobbing deep in a black night of despair meant nothing to him. She was a puffed and empurpled pillow only, a cringing bank of crimson nourishment, a vile vermilion container for his purposeful and methodical development. Her fitful, horror-filled sleep, her days of prayerful remorse and sorrow meant nothing to Knox...

The woman stood at the wooden block, with the carcass of a dead cow, poor cow, before her. A block she could have placed her head on. Her hatred for the child inside was back and furious, burning but living. She loathed it with her being, and knew her God loathed her. At three she was wet between her legs, and much heavier in her lower belly. Knox held on, sensing some change. By four she knew she was losing the unwanted inside her. The wetness, first hot, was cold, but never drying, a flow now added to by itself. Knox emboldened his grip, tiny toes and fingers nipping the flesh within, with a vicious vengeance. She knew her slip and knickers were dark and red, but hidden by her heavy tweedy skirt. She gripped the edge of the block and stared ahead. Darkened clots, livid and liverish, slipped slowly through her, but she held on, her knife hooked into the rib cage of a Kerry Blue, her knuckles whitened on its haunch. Just get out of me.

She thought of her three living children, asleep above her. She had loved each of them when they were first put into her arms and first nuzzled at her, a big wallow of love came over her and a soft warmth, but it had gone too fast, and each one got less of that until the last had just been born and dealt with, with no time for much love. This one, a sinful bastard, coming sooner than term according to her design and her sinful intelligence, would slip away, into the mincer, into the offal can, into the pigs, and away.

Nobody would know what or how, just herself and her God, and she'd make herself forget. Stoical, diligent, tough, she'd wash her underclothes, keep her man off her dirtiness for a bit, heal up, and bite her lip. That was the Presbyterian way, stoical and stern, and she'd be that. God would love her for what she demonstrated, and not forgive her for what she'd done.

At five she was faint, and, as the blinds were down and the door was locked, she lay down on the cool tiles just for a second. Nobody would ever know, she thought, as she lay there feeling queasy and hot, with her red cheek against the coldness of the white tiled floor. Sawdust stuck to her lip, and a fly buzzed across and settled on her hair. It crouched and waited. Knox lay still, gripping and waiting it out, each minute developing him more, each second nudging him towards viability and joyous biting vital life...

The sweat under her arms made big patches on her shirt. She would just close her eyes for one wee minute.

Big red blots soaked the weave of her skirt. Just one precious second. A slimy puddle at the hem. Forty winks. Saliva drawn in lines onto the sawdust.

Knox was born – if you can call it that – towards six, getting no further than her thighs, coagulating into her flesh in purple, crimson, black. He had held on until the expellant forces of a dead woman could be resisted no further. A half cow on a hook overhead, the other half decimated on the block. This poor cow on the floor, curled in her own insides, with her lips stuck to her gum and her eye rolled white and dry in its socket.

Knox, jelly and bone, waited. In the dark he glowed and fizzed and pulsed, with energy for survival greater than had ever been felt in Ireland. Spawn of Sin, ignited by lust for living, this foetal mass, on the edge of existence, would live, and more than live. With an adult knowledge, this scrap of infant waited for the next stage of his survival, pressed against the cooling thigh of the gelatinous cavern of the mother he no longer needed.

Pounding on the window at eight led to enquiry, to consternation, to discovery, and to private and public horror. Denouncement, shame, sorrow; those who were guilty hurled the first stones of hatred and castigation at the humped and haemorrhaged unholy corpse of this mother. Magdalen, Babylon, Jezebel, Hoor.

Her man knew, he knew, he knew – this black haired shitted-out almost-wean was not his doing, and he wished with his black heart that it had perished with its filthy mother.

But the miniscule Knox – all raw and plucked – was gathered into linen tea towels, and rushed away by the matrons of the Parish who would tend to him while he was an infant victim, ensure his life, then pass him back to darkness without love or comfort with his siblings. They prayed to their Almighty in His Wisdom to breath life into this innocent child who so nearly came to grief in a butcher's shop on the Waterside. Whatever horror had happened, and they could only prim-lipped surmise, it was not this infant's fault. Look at him, tiny like a wee dark-headed fledgling fallen from its nest, poor wee mite, poor wee mouse. Scoop him up, raise him up, save him, anoint him. Let us feel like Saviours, sanctified, sanctimonious, solemn, righteous. Ardens sed vivens. For ever and ever, Amen.

Knox's triumphant survival: his cord cut by a butcher's knife, he never looked back. A bag and half of sugar, yet with a hot pulse and a strong beating heart, Knox's start was ominous and unlikely. The death of his mother was a community scandal, an opportunity for the great and the good to rail against weakness and fecklessness. His birth was a community

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scandal, a baby so obviously, unavoidably different to its siblings, and – as that baby grew – so unavoidably and obviously like his absent uncle.

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A Protestant man asleep in bed while his Protestant wife laboured on a bastard below: sums were done and knowing looks exchanged. The Protestant man's whiskey bottle glowed under his bed, hot, sullen and shameful, his liver burned, and his hand shook almost imperceptibly in the pew on Sunday. A Protestant child (for it couldn't not be) born bruised and bloodied, early, and with hair as black as coal: Original Sin was considered and knowing looks exchanged.

Knox's mother's corpse, the fornicator, turned and burned on a hellish spit deep in the bowels of the Earth.

Why was this Protestant infant, so tiny and mewling, so vulnerable and so raw, so much a God-given life to be preserved, why was this child uncomfortable to be beside? Why did the Parish matriarchs pass him back so readily, with such desire to have him returned to his family, with such a collective sense of relief when he was back in the Waterside? What wolfish and ferocious capability did this tiny creature have, with tiny lips that dragged goat's milk off a spoon with a fierceness they'd not encountered before?

Would it not have been better if he'd gone with his mother?

Knox fed like his life depended on it, and it did; and it was unsettling to those who witnessed the actuality of this survival, raw and vulgar and intense, where other such infants had daintily slipped over, tidily, into peaceful eternal sleep leaving those who'd fussed to feel a warm glow of holiness in endeavour and a tiny hint of relief in consequence.

Knox's eyes, still filmy, measured his family home in grey and beige, with little tonal range and little stimulus. Pale, sombre faces – the three siblings – looked down with little interest and much less joy. These were children who were not formally in an abused state as were their Popish brothers, not technically harmed by their domestic circumstances as were their Bogside neighbours, not demonstrably ill-treated in a broad and physical sense as were their Catholic counterparts. Rather, their lives were enacted in pale and bleached shades, in insipid hues, at low volume, and with little texture or intensity. Days ran into weeks for these children as the Sixties dawned in Derry City, and only the Sabbath stood out, when – in a colourless row – they sat next to their furious father, their nostrils singed by the bitter scent of his anger mixed with a taint of sourest whiskey, and the merest notion of something sweet and illicit and bodily.

Knox's eyes, still filmy, saw mud-watery shades because that was the colour of his family and his home. Its tastes and smells were no more piquant. The flavour and whiff of mean boiled-mutton soup permeated the house on Violet Street whether it was on the menu or not. That, and the smell of little children, slightly urine-sharp, with an undertone of coal dustiness.

And on top, the acrid pungency of goats' milk that Knox was started on and fed to him by siblings whose resentment was palpable. While these children had not felt loved by their mother, she was theirs, and this child had been the cause of her death. They didn't think this up themselves, but they picked it up from the whispers of the mourners, and the intimations and accusations helped them make sense of their mother's absence. As is customary in Presbyterian funerals, such children do not see the dead, nor do they go to the grave, nor do they see the burial. To them, the dead disappear, are suddenly absent, inexplicable and confusing, and as with any human being, they seek sense, make sense and desire retribution. So, retribution came in petty pinches, small slaps and dirtied milk that Knox received from his nameless sexless siblings. And further retribution came in the sullen naming of him.

Knox Knox, that's his name alright, Knox Knox. He's not getting no other name, unless some other man'll give it to him, right?

So, unsteadily, he challenged the Registrar, and so unsteadily he signed the infant into society.

Yet, whatever retribution their small collective power allowed them to make, Knox added it to the steel of his spine, growing quickly and assuredly as only a child destined for dominance can, all the while propelled by the memory of the crimson cavern where he had begun and the comforting compression that uterine cradle had provided him with. Nothing in Violet Street came near, and that was his insatiable hunger.

An insatiable hunger, and – before any tenderness or sympathy grows for the ill-named Knox Knox – remember, this infant came out of sinfulness, and was a destined survivor. As incubus and succubus in one, Knox was in-waiting for adulthood, biding his time through infancy and childhood, hoarding an electric energy that would propel him to the troubled Cityside, to Antrim's heirs, to the lawlessness of England, and into the arms and heads and holes of a squaddie, a lady, a sexless woman, a Yankee colonel, a Presbyterian preacher, and eventually into Hell itself.

Nothing happened between Knox's infancy and the moment in 1966, upstairs, in his father's room, where Knox ran up the stairs, and his running steps must have disturbed the door, and the door swung open, and he saw, in a split second, like a frozen picture, his father discharging himself into the low drawer of the chest where his mother's underwear was still kept. And Knox's nostrils flared to the sweet and illicit and bodily smell that was faint in church, but was so strong here in this moment. And Knox's eyes flickered as his father lunged at the door, his seemingly huge pale member flailing wildly, slapping uncontrollably back and forth, released from the tension of his father's purposeful hold, and gobs of semen spilling on fabric and floor, and his father's contorted face suddenly on top of him, with the spittle flying and the burning words pressing into his flesh, Fuck you, ye'wee bastard... And the wind leaving him as his father struck him with an Almighty force, and him flying in a slow-mo arc out and over the banister and into the stairwell where the impact sounded like the loudest punch-bang against wall and floor, and Knox's lights went out.

Nothing happened between this moment and Knox waking up three days later in Altnagelvin Hospital with a blue lump the size of a duck egg on his forehead, a badly bruised knee, a body of pure pain, and his father in a permanently stony and broodingly hostile mood.

Knox went home in bandages, but the atmosphere of 22 Violet Street was grim. Sibling hated sibling, and all the siblings hated Knox. The rain came down in buckets, and blame and recrimination hung in the air. If the father could have strangled Knox and got away with it, he would have done just that, and taken his chance with his God, so distracted, agitated, angry and affronted was he. Something was up, though. Something more than what Knox had seen and what had happened subsequently, or almost simultaneously, if Knox's memory served him right. The father had taken to pacing, up and down, in and out, and the rain persisted with a rapid insistent beat on the windows and the roof with no let up, and no respite for all their frayed nerves.

Nothing happened between his father discharging that stuff from that big pale member, his mother's undergarments encrusted in dried layers of the stuff (for he had looked), the pervading sweet smell, the change in mood and demeanour of his father, the general mood of the house. The sweet smell grew stronger, and Knox waited. Nothing happened between this time (oh, apart from the Troubles breaking out in 1968, with 'Derry stroke Londonderry' going ballistic) and 1973, when Knox was 14, and reached the time he had waited for...

1973 was not the worst year of the Troubles. In the year preceding, 479 individuals variously lost their lives, and, in the year after, 294 people died. In 1973 then a modest 253 Loyalist, Republican, British and other corpses were generated by this local conflict. In the

year before, Bloody Sunday saw thirteen civilians killed and fifteen wounded by British soldiers of the Parachute Regiment in Derry's Bogside, and on Bloody Friday months later nine were dead and over a hundred maimed by twenty-two IRA bombs in forty-five minutes in Belfast's city centre. In the year before that, internment's introductory swoop took 400 suspected terrorists into custody, and shootings, rioting, bombing and intimidation took firm grip in the North and in the North-West counties of Ireland.

The Waterside's Protestant population seemed to tighten in its resolution against any threat from the insurgent Catholic population around them, across the Foyle on the Cityside, in the not-so-far-off weasel warrens of West and North Belfast, and in the priest-infested and Rome-ruled so-called Free State over the border.

Knox's father, embittered and abandoned, joined the 5th County Londonderry Battalion of the Ulster Defence Regiment,

part time, and found other embittered and abandoned men there with whom he could grow away from his Presbyterian fundamental truths and towards a fervent allegiance to a Loyal Ulster under Queen and Crown. As Knox grew and developed in the dark of the 1970s like a rank tuber curled inward and almost oblivious to the state of chaos and entrenchment in his community, Knox's father – in his new uniformed and regimented status – patrolled the darkened streets of Derry city and the darker roads of the outlying landscape, setting up checkpoints and road blocks and guarding against the shadowed faceless forces of Republicanism. As Knox pulsed and throbbed into a tumescent and fetid puberty, the country's breathing quickened and the charge of violence electrified the air across fields, and playgrounds, and townlands. The brooding landscape seemed forever pressed by a sullen grey sky: roads were closed off, bullets came by post to family homes, hooded bodies appeared on roadsides at lonely dawns, night-time knocks preceded single shots, and widows wailed...

Knox's father, permitted to bring his Army-issued rifle home, found no solace in its presence. With it, in 1974, Knox's oldest sibling would shoot his own brains out in bed one Sunday morning. His girlfriend, illicitly there unbeknownst to the household would run screaming and naked into the hall, her breasts dripping with his brain matter, her eyes starting from her head, and at that very moment – outed to the Knox clan as a filthy jezebel – this girl, uncounted Troubles victim, would lose her mind and never utter an intelligible word again. In 1978, both other siblings would be caught in a bomb blast in the centre of Portadown while on a church shopping trip. One, the older, would be merely scraped up. What could be separated from the pieces of others and recognised as human remains would never be shown, would be buried in a closed coffin, would lie under a stone marked 'Killed by Terrorists'. The other would be a silent living corpse for four years, kept inflated and nourished by tubes and wires, until death intervened in a farcical cruelty that Knox's father would proclaim nothing less than unGodly. And in 1979, when a masked man would knock at Knox's father's back door at eleven one rainy November night and ask his name, Knox's father would tell him calmly, and accept the bullet between his eyes with tired gratitude and bitter relief. But, by then Knox would be long gone.

But go back to 1973. The year Knox's father joined the UDR. Knox was fourteen. And something happened.

"Knox lay low for months, and the 1970s moved forward. He made his next move in 1977, and by the time Bobby Sands and his nine fellow self-starvers were carried Christ-erotic and sacrificial into the arms of wailing women and brooding men, Knox was off this island, and in a small gloomy square behind Goodge Street, looking down at a penitent wiping his lips."

A neighbour's son, a fellow UDR soldier of nineteen, came to the house to collect Knox's father for a routine patrol. Sitting in the kitchen, Knox's father moved around upstairs getting himself ready. Knox passed through to go to the toilet at the back of the house downstairs. The young man, whom he knew from Bible class, stood up. Knox hesitated. The young man, his cheeks blazing, reached out rapidly. His fingers grazed Knox's shoulder. Knox turned. The young man moved forward quickly. His full lips pressed onto Knox's. For a second his muscular tongue writhed across Knox's lips, parting them roughly, making his eyes open wider. He pulled back, his breath coming quickly. Knox's cock went hard as a rock. The young man looked ahead. As though nothing had happened. Knox walked on. As though he hadn't been interrupted in his walk to the toilet. Getting there, he leaned his left hand against the far wall, pressed his head to the cold cistern halfway up the wall, dropped his trousers and jerked himself off with such fury that when he came it hit the wall and bounced back onto his vest. Fuck. That was fucking fucking fucking unbelievable.

The 1970s Troubles took hold of the Province with little let up. Curfews, internment, violence, repression, ammunition, explosives. Shankill Butchers, Kingsmill Killers, the Miami Showband murdered, Stormont rule followed by Direct Rule, Sunningdale, the Ulster Workers' strikes. Republican and Loyalist eyes looked inwards as if Northern Ireland would spectacularly devour its own innards for their entertainment and delight. By the very beginning of the 1980s, the Hunger Strikers were doing just that. The Waterside was entrenched through all, Violet Street snug in the heart of its wakeful, watchful Protestant populace. No Surrender.

Knox, however, was oblivious to the prosaic goings on of his sectarian city. For him, time passed with nothing happening other than his persistent multi-sensory libidinal obsession with the smells, sounds, sensations of sex as ignited that evening by his wordless neighbour. While men starved themselves for principles, or murdered and maimed others for beliefs, Knox fed off the invincible power generated in him by his autoerotic night habits, his nocturnal walks across Craigavon bridge to see British soldiers, cooped up in wire towers, ready to explode, his moonlit meanderings near the Foyle on the docks side where sailors smoked and drank and fucked the drunken slags who drank at Porter's Bar, his shadowy creepings in derelict shirt factories over on the West Bank where others crept and kept away.

By the middle of his teenage years, Knox had tasted the mushroom-beige nipples of a boy met near the Walls in the dead of a silent night, he had touched the lavender cock-head of a lad encountered at the Star Factory when midnight rioting had Cityside Derry passed out and exhausted at a grey dawn, and he had introduced the raspberry peach-skin of a squaddie's balls to the hard tip of his tongue in a bunker off Orchard Street. And it was this last that stole the show. Mid-1970s Derry, the Cityside at least, had a different crawling night-time life, under the skin of the horror of futile struggles enacted so viciously and energetically for two different types of union. Other unions – for money, lust, company, to ease the pain, quench the thirst, scratch the itch, or quell the urge to kill or be killed – were witnessed only by those there and the walls. Knox's squaddie had almost passed out, leaning against the concrete in the pitch dark, the lights across the water just about picking up the white bones of Knox's hand as it stroked faster and faster, the squaddie's cock bouncing like a conger eel against Knox's taut tongue tip and soft wet lips, thick and veined, his breath gasping out, his eyes tight shut.

As the hand blurred, sparks flew in the young man's brain, and his inside seemed to rise up as though his ejaculation would annihilate all in front of his, this Ulster bastard, this shitting city, and this God-forsaken piss-hole of a land. His girlfriend in Leeds would be waiting for him on his return from duty, and his mind fumbled for mental picture of parts of her to cum on. As her imagined breasts formed in his mind's eye, he and his gun simultaneously discharged, his body crumpling away from Knox, leaving his hand warmly

wet and aching. Knox ran like the Devil was after him, the shot still ringing out. Shouts, running feet, soldier comrades who'd seen their pal get lucky on patrol as they also did from time to time, who'd let him get on with it with what they'd later swear blind was a mangy tart with long fair hair, and who now hauled up their lifeless comrade's trousers and 'made him right' before calling in the incident, and who much later and en masse kicked a blind man senseless up near the Creggan as retaliation.

Knox lay low for months, and the 1970s moved forward. He made his next move in 1977, and by the time Bobby Sands and his nine fellow self-starvers were carried Christ-erotic and sacrificial into the arms of wailing women and brooding men, Knox was off this island, and in a small gloomy square behind Goodge Street, looking down at a penitent wiping his lips.